

The role of paternal mind-mindedness in preschoolers' moral development

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Summary

It is well demonstrated that the quality of parent-child relationships significantly relates to children's moral development (Hasting et al., 2007). One aspect of parenting that appears likely to contribute to child moral conduct is parental mind-mindedness (MM: Meins et al., 2001). Specifically, paternal MM may be associated with children's moral development, because it is often proposed to offer children an opportunity to reflect on their own ideas and those of others (Laranjo et al., 2014), which in turn is one of the foundations of moral reasoning (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). 68 parents-infant triads participated in this study. Paternal MM was assessed with a 10-minute father-child free play session when children were aged 18 months, later rated by a trained assistant using Meins et al.'s (2001) coding system. When children reached 3 years, their mothers reported on their rule compliance, and their inhibitory control was assessed with a "Snack Delay" task. The results suggest that after accounting for the contribution of child temperament, paternal MM explained a unique 7% of the variance in inhibitory control. In contrast, the relation between paternal MM and mother-reported compliance with rules was not significant.

Introduction

- ❖ One important foundation of child functioning is **moral development**, which can be **manifested in different ways**, including cognitive (e.g., knowledge of family rules), emotional (e.g., guilt following inappropriate behavior), and **behavioral indices** (e.g., inhibition, compliance)
- ❖ When children are approximately 2 years of age, parents gradually shift their focus from primary care to **educational components**, such as teaching their children the values and standards of conduct, also known as **socialization** (Laible & Thompson, 2000)
- ❖ Children's response to those requests may be compliance or disobedience → One of the observable manifestations of which is spontaneous **compliance with rules** (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995)
- ❖ Around the age of 3, many children are able to **voluntarily inhibit an inappropriate but dominant response**, to adopt one that is more suitable and socially acceptable
- ❖ **Parental MM**, which is defined as parents' proclivity to consider and treat their child as a separate individual with an active and autonomous mental life of thoughts, intentions, and desires (Meins, 1997), is often proposed to offer children an **opportunity to reflect on their own ideas and those of others**
- ❖ As children become able to **anticipate the consequences of their behavior on others' emotional experience** (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008), they are better equipped to make the **deliberate decision to inhibit certain gratifying** yet inappropriate behaviors, thus showing moral conduct

Hence, parental mind-mindedness could favor child moral conduct.

Current study

The aim of this study was to investigate the longitudinal links between paternal mind-mindedness during father-child interactions and the development of some of young children's first behavioral manifestations of moral conduct, namely inhibitory control and rule-compatible behavior (i.e., compliance with rules).

Participants

- ❖ 68 infant-parents triads
- ❖ **Criteria** for participation were full-term pregnancy and the absence of any known physical or mental disability or severe developmental delay in the infant
- ❖ **Age at T1:** 18 months ($M = 18.27$, $SD = 0.98$)
- ❖ **Age at T2:** 3 years ($M = 36.72$ months, $SD = 0.86$)
- ❖ Mothers were between 21 and 45 years old ($M=31$)
- ❖ Fathers were between 21 and 58 years old ($M=34$)
- ❖ Parents had between 6 and 23 years of **formal education** ($M=15$)
- ❖ **Family income** varied from less than \$20,000 CDN to more than \$100,000 CDN ($M=\$60,000$ to 79,000 CDN)

Measures

18 months (T1):

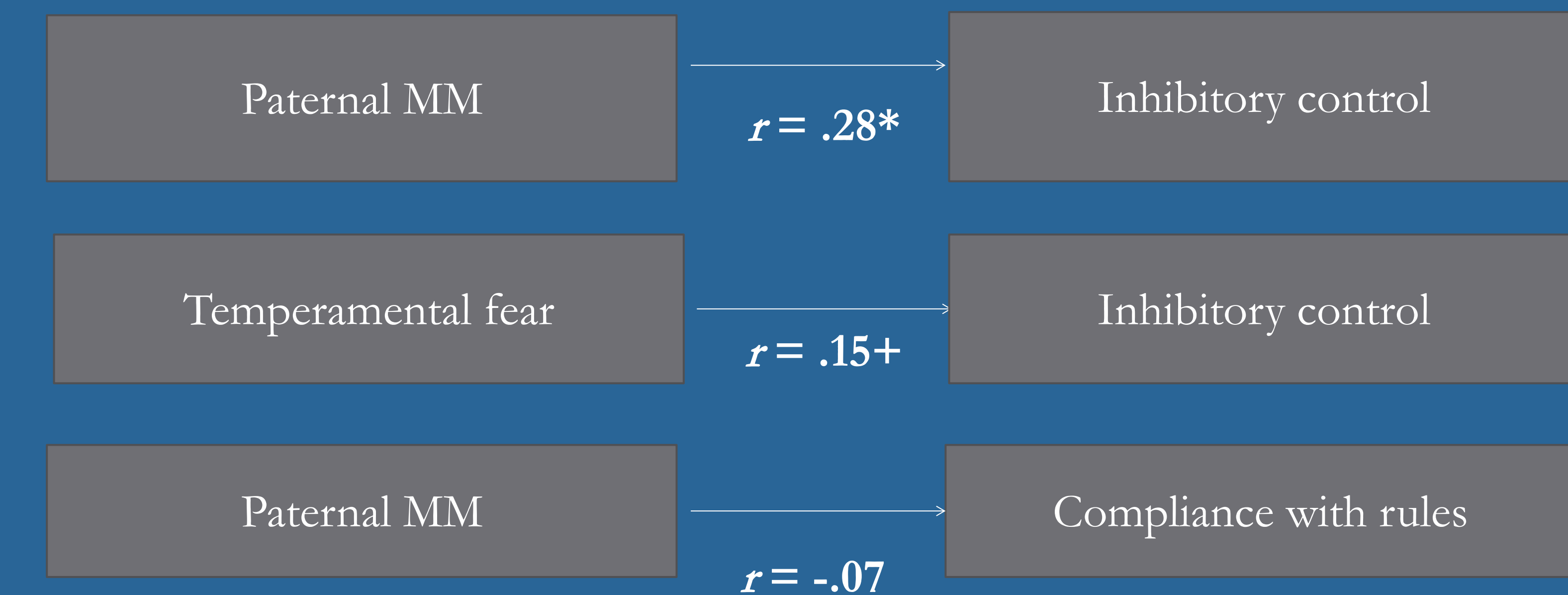
- ❖ Paternal mind-mindedness was assessed with a 10-minute father-child free play session
- ❖ These videotaped interactions were later rated, using Meins et al.'s (2001) coding system
- ❖ Five categories of mind-related comments were assessed : comments on the infant's mental state, such as thoughts, desires and knowledge, comments on mental processes (e.g., "Do you remember the zebra at the zoo?"), comments on the infant's emotional engagement (e.g., "You are happy"), comments on the infant's attempts to "manipulate" other people's thoughts (e.g., "Are you kidding me?"), and comments that involved the father speaking for the infant (e.g., "See dad, it's easier this way").
- ❖ The mind-mindedness score is obtained by adding up all appropriate comments from each category, thus representing the total number of appropriate mind-related comments made by the father during the interaction

3 years (T2):

- ❖ **Compliance with rules:** Mothers were asked to complete the 20 items constituting the "Internalized Conduct" subscale of the "My Child" questionnaire ($\alpha=.87$; Kochanska et al. 1994). This subscale measures children's willingness to comply with rules, whether in the presence or absence of external control.
- ❖ **Inhibitory control:** Inhibitory control was measured with a "Snack Delay" task (Kochanska, 1996). Four trials were used, of increasingly longer duration: 5, 15, 30, and 45 seconds. Scores consisted of the sum of the two last wait times (due to lack of variability on the first two trials).
- ❖ **Temperament:** Temperament was assessed with the *Toddler Behavioural Assessment Questionnaire* (TBAQ; Goldsmith, 1996), completed by mothers. The TBAQ consists of 110 items on a Likert scale, assessing mothers' perception of their child's personality.

Results

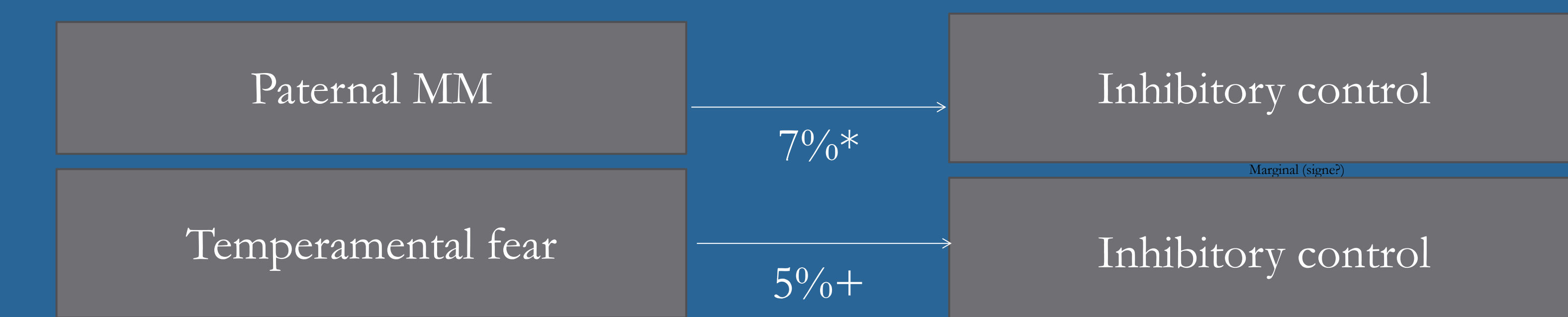
* $p < .05$
+ Marginal



Regression analyses predicting inhibitory control (N=68)

Block	R ²	ΔR ²	Fchange	β
1. Temperamental fear	0.05		3.52	0.22+
2. Paternal MM	0.12	0.07	5.15*	0.26*

Child sex and family SES were not controlled for, because they were unrelated to inhibitory control or compliance with rules.



Conclusions

These results show that when fathers demonstrate mind-mindedness, this may help children understand the differences between what they think or feel and what others think or feel, which in turn, may support children's growing capacity to behave properly (i.e., inhibit an inappropriate behavior). Importantly, this putative influence of mind-mindedness is independent from a well-documented correlate of inhibitory control, namely child temperament.

References

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